

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 21, 2003

## **GIVE THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT THE TOOLS IT NEEDS TO PROTECT VULNERABLE CHILDREN**

Dear Colleague:

Imagine being ten years old. Now imagine living for months locked up in a detention facility, hundreds or thousands of miles away from any family or friends. Imagine being unable to understand the language that others around you are speaking. Imagine having to participate in complex legal proceedings that will determine the course of your life without an understanding of what is happening. Imagine having to deal with all of this without the assistance of an attorney.

All the while you end your day in a locked room. All alone.

No, you're not in a foreign country. This is the plight of many young girls and boys who arrive unaccompanied in the U.S. These children are treated in a manner that our country usually reserves for criminals, not helpless victims. While some unaccompanied immigrant children are released to family members, others are detained in institutional facilities, far away from family or friends. Human rights and child advocacy organizations have expressed concern about the placement of children in facilities with juvenile offenders, and even more dire, their placement in adult facilities with adult offenders.

Last year, Congress transferred the care, custody, and placement of unaccompanied alien children from the Department of Justice (DOJ) to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to improve the treatment children receive when encountered at our borders. This is certainly a big step in the right direction and we commend the steps already taken by HHS to improve the care and custody of these vulnerable children. Unfortunately, ORR inherited a system that relied upon a variety of punitive facilities to house children and was given little legislative direction to implement their new responsibilities. As a result, some children from repressive regimes or abusive families continue to fend for themselves in a complex legal and sometimes punitive system, without knowledge of the English language, with no adult guidance, and with no legal counsel.

Now is the time for new legislation to complete the positive steps we have already taken to ensure that unaccompanied alien minors are not locked up in detention facilities with no legal help or adult guidance. We need legislation that will ensure minimum standards for the care and custody of unaccompanied children and will provide the smooth transfer of minors from the Department of Homeland Security to ORR.

Please join the co-chairs of the Refugee Caucus and other supporters of unaccompanied alien children by cosponsoring a bill that will give ORR the tools it needs to fully protect this group of vulnerable children. For more information or to cosponsor this bill, please call Ur Jaddou (Rep. Lofgren) at 5-3072 or Todd Thorpe (Rep. Cannon) at 5-7751.

Sincerely,



ZOE LOFGREN, Member of Congress  
Refugee Caucus Co-Chair



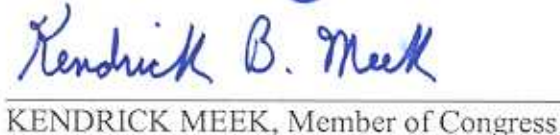
CHRIS CANNON, Member of Congress



JOHN CONYERS, Member of Congress  
Refugee Caucus Co-Chair



MELISSA HART, Member of Congress



KENDRICK MEEK, Member of Congress



CHRIS SMITH, Member of Congress  
Refugee Caucus Co-Chair



JAN SCHAKOWSKY, Member of Congress



ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN, Member of Congress  
Refugee Caucus Co-Chair